The Key Is In The Kremlin

Talk about a tough neighborhood: The unfolding tragedy in Syria has claimed over 75 thousand lives and over two millions refugees, the Assad regime has used nerve agents against its own people, and Syrian rebel groups have videotaped executions and even engaged in cannibalism in the name of God.

Lives have been lost and red lines have been crossed. Yet, there seems to be no end in sight.

Besides the human cost to the people of Syria, the failure to address the crisis there carries three main risks to all who have an interest in preserving peace and stability in the Middle East.

First, the fires of tribal and sectarian blood-feuds are not easily doused in our region. The longer this conflict goes on, the greater the chances that a post-Assad Syria will end up a Somalia – a failed state of constantly warring factions.

Second, the more often chemical weapons are used, even on a small scale, the greater the chances that chemical weapons will be employed en masse as psychological barriers and external deterrence breaks down. So too, with each passing day, the prospects grow that chemical weapons will fall into terrorist hands, which could quickly turn a Syrian civil war into a much wider regional conflict. Israel is acutely aware of this danger and is committed to doing whatever is necessary to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining Syria's lethal and advanced weapons arsenal.

Third, the Syrian crisis, dangerous as it is, detracts leaders from effectively tackling a problem whose risks are far more acute – a nuclear-armed Iran.

Admittedly, there are no easy answers for dealing with Syria. True, Assad's armed forces are weak and debilitated by infighting. His air force and air defense systems can be destroyed in a relatively short time frame by powers both inside and outside the region. But that won't necessarily end the fighting or secure Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons.

The other alternatives that have been raised – a US, NATO or Turkish imposed "no fly zone", establishing a safe corridor for refugees along the Turkish and Jordanian borders, and US or Israeli strikes against the chemical weapons facilities - are also not without significant risks.

While all these options must remain on the table, right now the best chances for a successful resolution of the Syrian crisis remain a diplomatic initiative to be lead by Russia.

There is plenty of blame to go around for the failure to put a better initiative in place previously. But that is for historians to debate. What is important now is not to miss another opportunity to resolve the crisis.

The Kremlin has at its disposal the necessary leverage to convince Assad to leave or at least to stop the fighting as a first step towards his ultimate departure. The Russians, for whom the naval bases in Tartous and Latakia as have strategic importance, have invested a lot of political capital, financial resources and prestige in the Assad dynasty over the last four decades. They

trained and equipped the Syrian army. They provided it with intelligence gathering capabilities. And they know the Syrian generals who command the chemical weapons units on a first name basis.

Russian military support for Syria is not a thing of the past. Their readiness to provide Assad with improved radars for the Yakhont surface-to-sea missile systems is deeply concerning. Even more dangerous is their intention to follow through on supplying the Syrians with the S300 anti-aircraft system, which could alter the delicate balance of weapon systems in the region.

Despite this support, the Russian leadership, shrewd as ever, well understands that the Assad regime is ultimately doomed and has lost all legitimacy, even if the Kremlin prefers not to say so publicly. Russia also does not want to see Islamic fundamentalists ruling Syria or endless civil war in a failed Syrian state. Russia has every reason to be a leading partner in a post-Assad Syria and to protect their strategic interests there.

That is why in a mirror -image of what happened in Libya, where Russia was asked to support a European led effort backed by the US, here Russia must be convinced to lead the international effort in Syria.

The Russians, like all of us, are far from perfect. But they are an important world power with special relevance to Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Their interests and perspectives have to be seriously ,taken into account along with those of all the other players.

There will definitely be a price for Russia's readiness to lead (a price that must be pre-negotiated if this diplomatic strategy has any chance to work) , and Russia will surely drive a hard bargain, But President Putin operated in a very responsible manner when it came to the supply of advanced air defense systems to Iran. We still have several months before SA 300 in Syria could turn operational. And however modern andeffective the system is not invincible or undestroyable. I believe that with the right approach, President Putin will act responsibly again, and I I believe that a successful Russian-led effort in Syria could help transform Russian attitudes towards constructive cooperation in other sour international theaters.

Given the interests of the rest of the international community, there is no reason why a mutually agreed special role for Russia in post-Assad Syria,to include recognising their naval interests, could not be found. While Secretary Kerry's recent diplomatic efforts did not yet bear fruit, he and the Administration should be applauded for trying sincerely

Given the high costs of allowing the carnage in Syria to continue and the high risks entailed in alternative courses of action, we should not abandon the effort. The key to Syria still lies in Moscow, and there is no time to wait.